

Into the depths of AT&T's let-us-buy-T-Mobile astroturf campaign

AT&T is legendary for laundering its public policy preferences through minority and social service groups that it supports financially in order to produce an apparent groundswell of support. We've written about it enough times not to be surprised by the practice anymore, but the Center for Public Integrity has just concluded an in-depth investigation of the practice that's well worth a look. In order to support its proposed T-Mobile buyout, AT&T has dug deep into its roster of supporters, going so far as to get local groups like the Shreveport-Bossier Rescue Mission to write letters of support to the federal government.

Naturally, just about every nonprofit contacted for the CPI article was shocked, shocked! at any suggestion that AT&T was pressuring them? though no one denied being asked to write the letters. A few of the quotes were telling. The Special Dreams Farm in St. Clair Township, Michigan received only about \$2,000 from AT&T over the last several years, but it went ahead and wrote a letter to the FCC asking the T-Mobile purchase to be approved. "Obviously we would like to support companies big or small if they're supporting us," said the group's president, Larry Collette, to CPI. "Everything is a two-way street."

Other groups, also refusing to say that they had been outright bought off, did admit that "we are suffering right now and we need their support."

AT&T's top lobbyist also heads AT&T corporate foundation, which disperses grants to thousands of small groups across the country. Such relationships can be useful when it comes time to show Washington what a wholesome company you run, but using grant money to help build support is hardly a tactic limited to AT&T. When a nonprofit called ReelGrrls criticized its corporate donor Comcast via Twitter, a Comcast exec wrote to the group and said that he "cannot in good conscience continue to provide [ReelGrrls] with funding?especially when there are so many other deserving nonprofits in town," given that "[ReelGrrls] is shaming us on Twitter."

The corporate message certainly need not be this explicit to be effective, of course; a gentle ask along with the one-sided presentation of some issue can be enough to get the job done. And a nonprofit focused on the homeless likely won't arouse the ire of its members by sending such a letter, so who cares? But backlash does happen on occasion. Three months ago, AT&T got hit hard after it convinced the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) to support the T-Mobile purchase. GLAAD members were outraged and mounted such an effective campaign that the group's director and several members of the board?including an AT&T executive?resigned.

God vs. AT&T

Going to local homeless shelters with an "ask" might be a new low, however. The letter from the

Shreveport-Bossier Rescue Mission that resulted was a true embarrassment to everyone involved, with the Mission's director telling the FCC (PDF) about how Christians "never stop working on behalf of the underserved and forgotten. It might seem like an out of place endorsement but I am writing today in order to convey our support for the AT&T/T-Mobile merger."

AT&T isn't the "underserved and forgotten," of course; instead, the letter suggests that "churches across the state and nation can use this mobile technology to spread the word of God more efficiently and effectively" and "the elderly could use wireless broadband for remote medical treatments." (As Karl Bode of DSL Reports put it, "Who knew God wanted higher prices, reduced competition, and a further entrenched AT&T and Verizon market duopoly?")

People who have not received money from AT&T seem to think the Almighty opposes the buyout, judging from comments in the FCC docket.

"so i urge u guys come support of God house what will jesus do have great benfits of low cost carrier than high cost carrier come to support Us to deny this merger it will not be good our commuity," said one letter to the FCC.

Another writer, with a slightly better grasp of grammar, complained about AT&T. "Even if I get unhappy with ATT I have no other providers to choose from this to me is very un-american and makes me feel like im living in a socialist county where we are forced to use what the goverment provides to us? I pray to god and ask you to please reconsider this deal I am not making this up when I say ATT is already to big for its britches?"

Another warned, "Fascism is illegal; monopoly is over...the top...there is a spiritual price...done deal...thank goodness goddess includes god!"

More succinct was this entry, which runs in its entirety: "monopolies are bad. seriously, for the love of god, stop screwing the american people. god will judge."

But even if he won't, the federal government looks set against the deal, at least in its current form, with the Department of Justice filing a recent lawsuit to stop it.